

Wednesday March 25, 2009

KSD hosts MegaDeaf conference with 40 other locations

By ART JESTER
art.jester@gmail.com

"Canada, are you out there?"

Yes, Canada was "out there" all right, as the first MegaDeafConference was being called to order Wednesday by its hosts at the Kentucky School for the Deaf, where the idea was hatched to connect via the Internet a teleconference with 40 schools, colleges, universities and other institutions that educate the deaf and hard of hearing.

The two-hour-long program included not only KSD and the Ernest C. Drury School for the Deaf in Milton, Ontario, but also the Minnesota North Star Academy, the Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind and the Ohio School for the Deaf. Although the number of participants couldn't be confirmed Wednesday, the 40 were believed to have represented 21 states; the District of Columbia; Belfast, Northern Ireland; and West Sussex, England.

See Thursday's Advocate for more details.

Copyright: The Advocate-Messenger 2009

Sunday March 22, 2009

Kentucky School for the Deaf in Danville goes global for MegaDEAF Conference



KSD teacher Clyde Mohan works out the kinks in the a video conference system in Brady Hall. The system will

be used Wednesday to connect KSD students with 39 schools around the world during the first-ever MegaDEAF Conference. (David Brock photo)

By DAVID BROCK
dbrock@amnews.com

At noon Wednesday Kentucky School for the Deaf will be at the center of a video conferencing network that will cross both linguistic and physical barriers.

That includes reaching the northern border of the U.S. and the Atlantic Ocean.

The MegaDEAF Conference will visually connect students from 39 schools in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom for two hours.

The Danville campus will serve as the command center, with KSD high school students using American Sign Language to communicate on video screens and playing the role of "video jockeys."

They will present a series of six student-produced videos from all over the country that range from ski lesson's taught by Montana School for the Deaf and Blind students to the Minnesota Northstar Academy's tutorial about online newspapers and podcasting.

The idea began to take shape two years ago when Clyde Mohan, a KSD teacher and the project's manager, became aware of students in distant locations being linked together for mega conferences online.

Mohan soon recognized that what worked for hearing video conference participants could play an even more vital role for deaf students.

"I started to grasp how video conferencing could be used to connect deaf students in particular," he said. "The mega-conference we saw was 12 hours long. We are starting small with just two hours, but we hope to expand this. Once we have it figured out we could do this with schools in Slavic countries, in Western Europe, in South America, across all different time zones."

The high-tech equipment that will be used for the conference was made possible by a \$440,000 federal E-rate grant.

In addition to two large screens and a camera in Brady Hall, where the video jockeys will be on Wednesday, there will also be locations for elementary, middle and high school students.

Also part of KSD's complement of video conferencing implements is the Maestro, which Mohan said several students refer to as "R2D2" because of its resemblance to the Star Wars movie robot. It is a portable device that includes a camera and will allow TVs or projectors used for interactive video.

The hardware puts KSD in the vanguard for technology in deaf education. The school's set up is so cutting-edge it is actually a prototype being developed by the company Tandberg.

KSD director of technology Deby Trueblood said that vendors are loaning equipment to other schools for the event, but she hopes more of them will also start to receive funding.

"Once we finally got the funding we looked around and there were not really other schools who had working equipment," Trueblood said. "Part of this conference is demonstrating to

everyone the applications that this has. Hopefully showing the benefits for deaf education will help more schools can get grants."

Only the beginning

Wednesday's activities will only scratch the surface of what KSD can do with video-conferencing in the future. Trueblood said that the program is just the beginning of what can be done to connect deaf students.

"The deaf population of Kentucky is around 3 percent and in the world it is around 10 percent," she said. "Our kids often lack people to talk to and this will allow them to broaden their worlds. We are really only limited in what we can do with this by our imaginations."

Mohan said that the potential to avoid travel and other costs will likely garner widespread attention during dire economic times.

Instead of loading buses and heading on a day-long field trip, kids could tour a historic site or a museum without leaving their desk.

However, where Mohan sees the most immediate impact is in actual classroom instruction.

"We can do distance learning and cooperate with other schools," he said. "If there is not a teacher for a certain class at a school for the deaf, a student could connect to a classroom at a school that does have a teacher for that subject. Right now our focus will be on lining up content and instruction with other schools."

When combined with the camera and two larger screens, the Maestro will allow teachers and students in different classrooms to see one another throughout a lesson.

Mohan said he has also witnessed the ways in which using ASL with video technology allows students to hone their language skills.

"I have already seen how this can help improve language. The kids make an effort to be significantly more clear with their signing when they are using the video, because they have to communicate effectively. Instead of using slang like they would in person they want to be clear and concise."

While students are no doubt curious about the chance to have a classmate in another location, Mohan said there is genuine excitement about the social aspect of video conferencing.

"When the Mason-Dixon Games were going on, the boys were here and the girls were in South Carolina at the same time," he said. "We had a video-conferencing party night and the kids were thrilled to be able to talk to one another. We can see the potential for all kinds of after-school activities and social events."

Mohan said he embraces the great expectations that will likely follow the MegaDEAF Conference.

"It is up to us now to take advantage of the technology and explore all of the ways it can help our students learn and interact," he said.